

In August of 1961, a fifty-one-year-old man named Clarence Gideon stood in a Florida courtroom, accused of breaking into a pool hall.

Too poor to afford a lawyer, he asked the judge for one. Florida didn't provide lawyers for cases like his. So he defended himself, untrained and alone, against an experienced prosecutor.

He did what he could. But he was alone, and it was not enough. He was convicted.

From his cell, Gideon wouldn't let it go. He taught himself law in the prison library and handwrote an appeal to the United States Supreme Court, arguing that the Constitution guaranteed him a lawyer whether he could pay for one or not.

The Court agreed to hear his case and ruled in his favor.

Florida had to try him again. This time, though, Gideon was not left to stand by himself. A lawyer stood beside him, investigated the case with skills

Gideon did not have, and found the holes in the state's only witness.

Gideon's lawyer took the case apart piece by piece. The jury took one hour to acquit him.

Same man. Same facts.

The only thing that had changed was the person who stood beside him.

Most of us know something of that feeling: trying to carry a burden we were never meant to carry alone.

And we also know the limits of even the best human help.

Even Gideon's lawyer, once the case was won, moved on to the next one. That is not a failure of love; it is the limit of being human. Every earthly advocate eventually has to step away.

This morning, I want to place before you an advocate who never steps away, and I want us to see how that changes the way we ask for help.

If you can, turn with me to Hebrews chapter 4 and place a bookmark or ribbon there.

We won't settle there for a little while. There's some ground to cover first, because Hebrews wants us to feel why this intercession is better.

Hebrews was written to people who were tempted to go back.

They had heard of Christ. They had professed faith in Christ. But pressure was mounting, and the old system still felt solid in their hands: priests they could see, sacrifices they could watch, a temple they could visit.

And Hebrews answers them by saying, "Don't go back."

Not because the old system was worthless. It had been given by God. But it was temporary, and it was always pointing forward to someone better.

Better priest. Better sacrifice. Better covenant. Better hope.

That is one of the great words in Hebrews: better.

This morning, we are going to focus on one of those betters: Jesus is a better intercessor.

So before we come to the comfort of Hebrews 4, Hebrews first takes us back to the old intercession and shows us its limits.

THE OLD INTERCESSION AND ITS LIMITS

The old intercession was interrupted.

Under the old covenant, the priesthood was real, and it was given by God. But it was carried by mortal men.

One man served faithfully for a season, and then another had to take his place.

We see that tenderly, and soberingly, in Aaron, the first high priest.

At Mount Hor, the LORD told Moses to take Aaron's priestly garments and put them on his son Eleazar.

Aaron died on that mountain, and Eleazar came down wearing the garments his father could no longer wear.

The office continued. The man did not.

Hebrews 7 is not mocking those priests. It is simply telling the truth about them: they could not remain forever. ***“Now many have become Levitical priests, since they are prevented by death from remaining in office.”***

Jewish tradition counts somewhere near eighty high priests between Aaron and the destruction of the temple.

Each succession was a reminder that the office could continue, but the intercessor himself could not remain.

The old intercession was interrupted.

The old intercession was impure.

Even when the priest was present, he still approached God as a sinner in need of mercy.

He had to bring a sacrifice for himself first, before he could bring one for them.

The limitation was not merely that the priests died. It was that even faithful priests were still fallen men.

Leviticus 16 makes that plain. On the Day of Atonement, Aaron, before he brought blood for the people, first brought blood for himself and for his own household.

Before he could stand for the people, he had to be covered by mercy himself.

That same weakness shows up throughout Hebrews: the old priest had to bring offerings for his own sins as well as for the sins of the people.

Hebrews 5:3 says he was ***“obligated to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the***

sins of the people.” Hebrews 7 calls those priests ***“men who are weak.”***

Do you hear the mercy and the limitation in that? The old mediator needed mercy himself before he could minister mercy to others.

So the old system was not cruel, and it was not careless. It was honest. It told the truth that no sinful mediator could finally cleanse sinful people. The old intercession was impure.

The old intercession was incomplete.

Once a year, and only once a year, the high priest passed through the curtain. He entered with blood, and he entered carefully, because that curtain marked a holy boundary God himself had established.

That moment was sacred. But it was also temporary by design.

The earthly sanctuary was holy because God appointed it, but Hebrews calls it ***“a copy and***

shadow of the heavenly things” (8:5). It was never pretending to be the final reality. It was pointing beyond itself.

And still, the people could not follow him in. The way into the most holy place had not yet been opened to them.

So year after year, the priest entered again. Year after year, blood was brought again. Not because the old system had failed at its purpose, but because its purpose was to point forward to a work that only Christ could finish.

A ministry that was interrupted. Impure.
And also incomplete.

All of that—the interruptions, the impurity, the incompleteness—was never meant to be the destination.

It was meant to make us long for a priest whose ministry would not break, whose access would not falter, and whose work would not need repeating.

JESUS IS THE BETTER INTERCESSION

Four things are true of this priest Jesus that were never true of the old ones.

Unbroken. Pure. Personal. Complete.

This morning, I want you to feel the weight of all four—and what each one means for you, this week, in whatever you're carrying in your life and into this room.

I. UNBROKEN—AND THE ANCHOR THAT HOLDS

Hebrews 7:25: “Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, since he always lives to intercede for them.”

Jesus's intercessory ministry in a word: Always. Not sometimes.

Christ's intercession is perpetual because the priest is permanent, holding an indestructible life that death already tried and failed to hold.

There is no gap, no succession, no moment when heaven's throne is without an advocate for the people of Christ.

Where does that permanence come from?

Hebrews already answered it back in chapter 7, and the answer reaches all the way back to Genesis.

Genesis 14 tells us that after Abram returned from rescuing Lot, a mysterious figure named Melchizedek—king of Salem, priest of God Most High—came out to meet him, blessed him, and received a tenth of everything Abram had.

No genealogy is given. No record of his birth. No record of his death.

He simply appears, blesses, and recedes from the narrative.

A thousand years later, King David wrote in Psalm 110:

“The LORD has sworn an oath and will not take it back: You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

Not a priest until he dies. Forever.

Hebrews 7:3 draws out exactly what that means: Melchizedek is

“without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.”

The man himself was not eternal.

But the pattern God wrote into that one strange meeting in Genesis 14 was pointing forward, across well more than a thousand years, to a priest who would not need a genealogy of succession because he would never need replacing.

And where is he interceding?

Hebrews 9:24 answers.

“For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands (only a model of the true one) but into heaven itself, so that he might now appear in the presence of God for us.” (Hebrews 9:24, CSB)

Jesus doesn't minister in an earthly tent, in a type or a copy.

He ministers in heaven itself—permanently, openly, with the authority of the Son.

Some of you are in a season with no visible end.

Not a crisis you can point to and say ‘this will be over by spring’—but a long stretch of difficulty, a marriage you're still working on, a health diagnosis you're still living inside of, a wait that has no date attached to it.

And in seasons like those, the temptation isn't usually to deny God. It's to wonder if he's still paying attention to your particular case.

In the year 60, the ship carrying the apostle Paul to Rome was caught in a storm so violent that Luke tells us the crew gave up all hope of being saved.

For fourteen days they drifted without sight of sun or stars—no way to navigate, no way to even know where they were.

Finally, sensing land was near, the sailors did the only thing left to do.

They dropped four anchors from the stern, into water they couldn't see the bottom of, and they prayed for daybreak. (Acts 27)

That's what an anchor is for. Not for calm water. For the night you can't see through.

Hebrews 6:19–20 uses that exact picture for what Christ has become for us:

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. Jesus has entered there on our behalf as a forerunner, because he has become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 6:19–20)

Read that again.

The anchor isn't fastened somewhere out in the dark, hoping for the best. It is fastened to a fixed point behind the curtain, in the very presence of God, where Jesus himself has already gone ahead of us.

He is not only interceding. He is the anchor point our hope is tied to.

The storm doesn't decide whether you hold. The anchor does—it is already fastened, already in the heavenly harbor you can't yet see.

But an anchor that holds is no comfort to someone who believes he isn't allowed to hold the anchor rope in the first place.

II. PURE—AND THE ACCESS ALREADY SECURED

Unlike the old priests, Jesus carries no sin of his own to deal with before he deals with ours.

“For this is the kind of high priest we need: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He doesn’t need to offer sacrifices every day, as high priests do—first for their own sins, then for those of the people. He did this once for all time when he offered himself.” (Hebrews 7:26–27, CSB)

The old priest had to obtain a sacrifice for himself before he could intercede for others.

Christ, however, wholly offered himself in sacrifice for others—and now intercedes on behalf of them forever.

There is no first step for his own account.

Every bit of what he did, he did for us.

And having done it once, he does not do it again, because it was never incomplete to begin with.

The contrast becomes unmistakable in Hebrews 9.

The old priest, verse 25, entered ***‘yearly with the blood of another.’***

Every entrance required a fresh sacrifice, because the blood of bulls and goats, Hebrews 10:4 tells us plainly, ***‘for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins’***—it covered, temporarily, what it could not actually remove.

Christ did the opposite of everything the old system required.

Hebrews 9:12:

“he entered the most holy place once for all time, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.” (Hebrews 9:12, CSB)

Once. Not year after year. Not his own household's sin first and then ours.

His own blood, for us, and done.

At the moment Jesus died, Matthew tells us the temple curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom.

Not from the bottom. Not as if a priest, or anyone on the ground, had finally forced his way through after years of trying.

From the top.

Torn by an invisible hand that could reach the top of a curtain reported by ancient sources to stand some eighteen meters high.

That is not a symbol of human effort finally succeeding.

It's the record of God himself ending, in an instant, the very barrier that had kept people out.

Hebrews 10 shows us what that torn curtain means for us now:

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus—he has inaugurated for us a

new and living way through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)—”
(Hebrews 10:19–20, CSB)

Access to God was opened once, by him, and it has not been closed since.

So when guilt tells you that you've disqualified yourself again, hear this clearly. When it tells you that you've gone back to the same sin one too many times, or that surely this is the time grace runs out, hear this clearly:

The curtain did not get torn a little, waiting to see how you'd do.

It was torn all the way, top to bottom, and it stayed that way.

And notice what the invitation does not say: wait until you feel worthy.

“let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.”
(Hebrews 10:22, CSB)

The assurance isn't something you work up. It's something you walk through.

III. PERSONAL—THE SYMPATHY THAT MAKES IT YOUR OWN

Permanence and access are not the whole of it.

An advocate can be always present and still be a stranger to what you're carrying.

But the advocacy of Jesus is not ignorant of our troubles. It's understanding.

When we consider Christ exalted—seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high—we can be tempted to imagine that the distance of his glory has cooled the warmth of his care.

To think that the Jesus who wept at Lazarus's tomb, who stopped for the blind man, who ate with sinners, has somehow moved on.

The seventeenth-century Puritan Thomas Goodwin spent an entire book answering that fear. He called it *The Heart of Christ in Heaven Towards Sinners on Earth*.

He wrote that Christ's heart, his pity and compassion, remains the same now as it was on earth; that he intercedes in heaven with the same heart he did here below; that he is as meek, as gentle, as easy to be sought, as tender now.

Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah described the servant of the Lord in words that read like an eyewitness account:

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like someone people turned away from; he was despised, and we didn’t value him. Yet he himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains; but we in turn regarded him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.” (Isaiah 53:3–4, CSB)

The suffering wasn't incidental to his mission.

It was the very thing that qualified him to carry what we carry. Isaiah saw it seven centuries before Hebrews named it.

Look at Hebrews 4:15 with me:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15, CSB)

He sympathizes.

The Greek word behind it means to suffer with. It means he enters into the suffering and makes it his own, rather than observing it from a distance.

He wept at the grave.

He felt the sting of betrayal.

He was hungry. He was weary.

He was accused of wrongs he never committed.

But Hebrews doesn't stop at sympathy.

It goes one verse further, and this is the verse most believers never get to.

Hebrews 2:18:

“For since he himself has suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.” (Hebrews 2:18, CSB)

He is not simply able to sympathize.

He is able to help right now, in the present tense. He helps those who are being tempted right now.

Not a memory of your struggle. He offers active help inside it.

In 1931, a young pilot named Douglas Bader crashed while performing aerobatics and lost both legs. Doctors told him he'd never fly again.

He learned to walk on metal legs, then learned to fly on them, and became one of Britain's most celebrated fighters until he was shot down and captured.

After the war, for the rest of his life, Bader spent enormous amounts of time visiting amputee wards—soldiers, factory workers, children who had lost limbs.

He didn't send a letter of encouragement.

He walked in, on his own prosthetic legs, and sat down next to them.

His words carried a weight that no doctor's could, because he wasn't describing the road. He'd walked it.

That is what Hebrews 2:18 is telling you about Jesus—except far greater.

He didn't just lose something and recover.

He was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin, and he did not fail once.

So when you are in the middle of testing and temptation and trouble, not after you've already given in, but right now in the struggle, you have a High Priest who isn't observing your situation distantly and clinically.

He's able to help, because he's been there, and he never once needed the help himself.

IV. COMPLETE—AND THE CONFIDENCE THAT KEEPS US RUNNING

Put those three together—unbroken, pure, personal—and you have a priest whose ministry lacks nothing.

Nothing more is needed. Nothing can be added.

Six centuries before Christ, the prophet Jeremiah looked past Israel's broken covenant and promised something the old system could never deliver:

“I will make a new covenant... I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts... I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin.” (Jeremiah 31:31, 33–34)

No priest under the old system could make that promise.

Every Day of Atonement simply reset the clock for another year.

By the time Hebrews 10 speaks, that promise is no longer future. It has been kept:

“By this will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time. Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can

never take away sins. But this man, after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.” (Hebrews 10:10–12, CSB)

Forever. Not reset annually.

Perfected—not almost, not eventually, but already, for everyone he is sanctifying.

And that completeness is meant to produce something specific in us: endurance.

Not just comfort for a moment, but the strength to keep going when the wait is long and the temptation is real and the weight doesn't lift as fast as we'd like.

Hebrews 10:23 says:

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”

And a few verses later, Hebrews 12:1–2:

“Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”
(Hebrews 12:1–2, CSB)

In the 1908 London Olympics, an Italian runner named Dorando Pietri entered the stadium first in the marathon, far ahead of the field—and completely spent.

He collapsed on the track.

He was helped to his feet by officials, staggered forward, and collapsed again.

Four more times he went down, and four more times he was helped up, until he crossed the line, disqualified for having been assisted, but remembered for a century for one thing:

He did not have enough left in his own body to finish. He needed hands.

We are not Dorando Pietri, alone on a track hoping someone reaches us in time.

We have a High Priest who has already run the race, already crossed the line, and is not standing at the finish shouting encouragement from a distance.

He is interceding for us right now, in the middle of the race, so that our confession doesn't waver and our legs don't give out before the line.

And since all of that is true—his intercession is unbroken, pure, personal, and complete—then there is only one thing left for us to do: come. Not cautiously, not wondering whether we're welcome, but with the boldness the text itself commands.

WHAT THIS INTERCESSION PRODUCES

Because our loving and sympathetic Savior always lives to intercede in heaven for those who come to God through him, we can come to the throne of grace with boldness—confident that what we receive there is secured by a better intercession that never fails.

Verse 16 of Hebrews 4 is where all of this becomes an encouragement for us to draw near:

“Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

That phrase—throne of grace—is not a random image.

In the tabernacle, the mercy seat sat atop the ark of the covenant, between the wings of the cherubim, in the very room only the high priest could enter, and only once a year.

It was the place where blood was sprinkled to turn back judgment for another year.

It was, quite literally, the seat of atonement.

Hebrews takes that same seat and brings us to the real throne of grace. We are invited to approach it ourselves, not once a year, and not through a priest standing between us, but boldly.

The blood that secures our access has already been offered, once, forever.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ. Come boldly. Not timidly.

His throne, which would have been a throne of judgment, has become a throne from which grace flows—the Lord seated there is not our adversary.

He is our intercessor.

In Christ, you receive mercy for your failures—the record that should condemn you is covered.

You receive grace for your needs—not just forgiveness for what is past but help for what is present.

And when the mercy feels far off—when the trial outlasts your strength and you wonder if you've been forgotten—remember Hebrews 13:5–6:

“He himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you. So we may boldly say: The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.”

Goodwin says this to the one who has looked for sympathy and found no help from friends, from family, from anyone:

In all miseries and distresses, you may be sure to know where to have a friend to help and pity you, even in heaven, Christ.

You will find men, even friends, to be oftentimes unreasonable, and their compassion often closed off from you.

And when earthly sympathy fails you, you may say, I know One who will not fail.

There is One in heaven whose heart is touched with the feeling of all your infirmities.

Come boldly. He is that One.

And if this is what waits for us at the throne of grace—mercy for our failures, grace for our needs, help in our weakness—then there is only one question left: will you come?

Not someday, not when you feel ready, but now, while the One who intercedes for you is calling you near.

A WORD FOR THE ONE WHO HAS NEVER COME AT ALL

Everything I have said so far assumes something: that you have already come to God through Jesus Christ and that you already stand among those

Hebrews 7:25 describes as 'those who come to God through him.'

But maybe you are here this morning, and you are realizing that you have never actually come to him yourself.

You have heard about a sympathetic priest, an anchor for the soul, and a curtain torn in two, but perhaps it still feels as though those words belong to someone else's story.

But this invitation is for you too.

So let me put the offer as plainly and gently as I know how.

The barrier that kept sinners out of God's presence has been torn down. Not partway. Not for some people only. Completely. Jesus Christ tore it down by living the life we could not live, dying the death our sin deserved, and rising again to show that the payment was accepted.

Hebrews 7:25 doesn't say he saves those who have earned it.

It says he is able to save completely those who come to God through him.

The word is come. Not perform.

Not clean yourself up first and then come.

Come, as you are, trusting him alone.

If you have never done that—never turned from trying to manage your own case before God and simply trusted the One who already stood in the gap for you—then hear this as an invitation, not a threat.

I am not inviting you to consider another idea or to try harder to prove yourself. I am inviting you to come to a person: Jesus Christ.

CLOSE

Hebrews was written to people afraid of their own weakness, aware of their guilt, uncertain about

tomorrow—people ready to let go of their confession and walk away.

Into that fear, the text places this: you have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, who always lives to intercede for you, whose heart has not changed from the heart that welcomed sinners on earth.

Right now, in this moment, he is alive, and he is interceding.

Your future is secure, not because your faith never trembles, but because he always lives to intercede for you.

Isaac Watts captured it in a couplet that has comforted believers for three centuries:

His powerful blood did once atone, and now it pleads before the throne.

The blood that was offered is the same blood that now pleads.

Nothing more is needed. Nothing can be added.

Clarence Gideon needed an advocate, and it changed everything—a conviction became an acquittal in an hour.

But even that lawyer could only stand beside him for a day.

He went back to his office, ended his connection with Clarence Gideon, and took other cases. He had done what he could do, and then his part was finished.

Not Jesus.

He is the anchor that holds when you can't see the harbor.

He is the pardon already signed, waiting for you to walk through.

He is the help that meets you inside the temptation, not after it.

He is the strength that carries your legs when
yours give out before the line.

He stands faithfully in the gap for you, ever living to
make intercession.

He does not change his mind about you.

He pleads his blood on your behalf.

So when you walk out of this room today and the
old fear tries to tell you you're back on your own
again, remember Clarence Gideon's story. The
verdict changed when someone better stood beside
him.

And remember the gospel's story. The verdict
changed because Someone better stands for you
still. He does not leave the courtroom, does not lay
down your case, and does not cease to plead his
blood on your behalf.

Come to the throne of grace with boldness.

He is the great High Priest of your confession.

He is better.